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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the history of teaching in ancient societies. Discussion centers on the role of the teacher and the purposes of education in non-Western civilizations: India, China, Egypt, Persia, and Israel. The close links between formal education and social structure are noted as well as the influence of religious beliefs on educational content. The contributions of the ancient Greeks to knowledge and scientific inquiry are discussed. It is emphasized that in all the ancient educational systems and models of teaching, idealism was stressed for the well-being of individuals and society. The continuing importance of idealism in the modern world of teachers is pointed out. (JD)

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Profiles in Teaching: A Celebration of Idealistic Perspectives

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Profiles in Teaching: A Celebration of Idealistic Perspectives

Introduction

Teaching is the noblest of professions, as per Hindu philosophy, and the ranking of "Teacher" in a person's life is only next to that of Mother and Father. A teacher has to be competent, in order to carve a niche for himself or herself if he/she wants to have an impact on the life of students. A friend, philosopher and guide, teachers command the respect and following of students, and create an impact on the lives of many. The shape of a nation is determined by the intellect and character of its citizens, whose mind and body are trained by the teachers, and to a limited extent, influenced by the environment of social values. Lighting a candle, rather than cursing darkness is not a norm; it is the action of people interested in the welfare of the society. The removal of ignorance through the spark of knowledge demands competencies and commitments uncommon to ordinary life. Finding solutions, is as important as identifying the problems. Teachers and what they teach have determined the destiny of nations in history. The history of education is as old as the history of mankind itself, and the number of systems and the list of educators being so endless, it is attempted to link the very ancient to current situations.

History of Teaching

The process of human inquiry is the force that determines culture and civilization. Socrates set inquiry as a criterion for exploration of new ideas and thought patterns. He was the earliest of master teachers in the ancient Greece, without a formal class room during the fifth century B.C. He went on inquiring on scientific matters, the purpose and function of the Universe, using three basic questions, *What? Why? and How?* to make people of

his times to think, and to think critically, in order to elicit answers to the endless questions, which will not end until he finds the answers that match his thoughts. He went on asking questions as though he did not know the answers, but the citizens knew full well, what a genius he was. In western civilization he was the first to start the process of critical thinking, on matters around man, be it astronomy, mathematics or philosophy, which posed a challenge to the authority of religion and of the State. Under the pretext of religion, and good citizenry, every thing in life was taken as granted, and the philosophy was dogmatic. His teaching of inquiry was considered a *corruption of the young minds*, for which he was tried for treason and atheism, and was given the reward of death by hemlock poison. He was distinctive for his devotion to ethics, development of the Inductive Method of reasoning, linking knowledge to happiness, and rationalism (Daley, 1966).
There have been great teachers who had outlived their lives, by their knowledge, and transferring that to the society through their students.

India

The origin of present day culture in India can be traced back to the times of Aryan immigration. The lack of formal education of the aborigines of the land, made them vulnerable to the tantric and supernatural powers of early Aryan settlers. The caste system was established, in which education was limited to learning the trade or profession of the caste a person is born into. Learning the religious scripts, mathematics, science, astronomy and astrology were the prerogative of Brahmins (the Aryans) and the upper class. The Kshatriyas (Kings) were to learn the art of warfare, the Vyshyas were to learn business and farming, and the Shudras were to learn the professions (manual labor) of their sub-caste. The role of women was only to take care of the house and the men in the house. However, the rules of the system was so

perpetuated or observed with all sincerity that it created a harmonious society in course of time. People were expert in their own area of specialization. The Brahmins engaged in an intensive and extensive study of the various aspects of the religion, and its origin till it was developed into an ideal society. Discipline and moral conduct was not only emphasized, but a part of life. Coeducation was not allowed.

The method of teaching and learning was instruction, and memorization. The Guru (the teacher) had absolute authority over his students, who lived in the house of the Guru learning from every word and actions of the teacher. This was called *Gurukula*. The teacher was highly knowledgeable and symbolic of every virtue, and people believed in his infallibility. Obedience, austerity, celibacy, mastery of the subject, discipline, and religious fervor were demanded of the students in absolute terms. Neither the teacher nor the students can afford to err, for, that was total shame and sub-human. The scripts were transcended to posterity by word of mouth instructions, and writings on stones and palm leaves. The Muslim invasion of and rule of India, few centuries before the British arrived, lead to the systematic destruction of the Hindu society and culture.

When the British arrived as traders and then started to rule the country, Hinduism started nurturing again. Renaissance of Hinduism during British rule was a political expediency, and not an admiration of the religion. It was easy to control a four tier society at the top than letting things as they were. Moreover, they could not ignore the strength of the wisdom and knowledge of the upper strata of the society, the Brahmins. The Brahmins had learned the language of the new rulers very soon, and every position of governmental authority, not held by the British were held by the Brahmins. Implementation of western school and instructional system in India

during the turn of 19th century, had helped the process of refining the educational system of the country. However, the importance of the teacher remained the same in society, as in the scripts of ancient India. In short, the Hindus celebrated the teachers with reverence, who deserved it by their devotion, competence and exemplary behavior.

These values remain the same in India today. Idealism is the dominant paradigm of education. Moral Instruction is part of regular curriculum. Character and conduct are emphasized as much as the mastery of the languages, arts, science and math. Reverence for the teacher remains unchanged in the class room and the society. Instruction by lecture, and learning by memorization are the methods of teaching and learning. Retention of acquired skills is by repetitive practice in the class room and by voluminous home works. High achievement in the class as well as proper character and conduct, do not meet with rewards, but rather considered a norm. Lack of meeting the standards will result in immediate punishment, which does not necessarily mean corporal one, but rather several forms. Learning two or three languages is not a choice, but a requirement. Student learning is a responsibility of the teachers in the interest of their career, of the parents in the interest of their children's future, of the students out of fear and an understanding of the world around them.

Teaching and education in other world cultures

In China, the Confucian thoughts of the fifth century B.C. dominated education and politics. His theories emphasized a disciplined individual, society and the ideal State, and were silent on the relationship of man, god, and the universe. Formal education in China did not start until the seventh century B.C.

Egyptian civilization is one of the oldest in the world. The earliest government of the *Pharoahs* ruled the empire with absolute authority. Pharoah was considered to be divine. The purpose of education was to prepare men for careers in government, and to become priests. There were two types of schools one called the Temple Schools, and the other State Schools.

In Persia, the religion Zoroastrianism was the dominant force in education. Formal education existed only for the noble people, and the people of the lower class learned at home from the father. Piety and patriotism was emphasized through story telling sessions, and no text book was ever used.

The Hebrews, who settled in Jerusalem during the second millennium B.C., were to learn and follow the law of God. The nation itself was god-centered. The method of teaching was *telling and repeating*. Jerusalem was conquered by the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans one after the other. The Roman King Titus destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and the Jews did not have a nation till 1948. However, it is not a coincidence that Israel, Hebrew and Judaism exist today, in its original form, but for the great works of the teachers of their religion.

Greece

The contribution of ancient Greece to knowledge and scientific inquiry is noteworthy. Socrates (469-399 B.C.), Plato (427-347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384-323 B.C.) had been great teachers, who sacrificed their lives for imparting the knowledge they had. Many of the root words in biology, physics and mathematics have their origin in Greek. This suffices to show the educational level attained in ancient Greece. Both the Athenians and the Spartans from the 2 great city-states of Greece made their own contributions to education and physical education. Spartan Education of the eighth century

B.C. endeavored to develop character, rather than mental caliber. Spartan youth ideally would become an obedient, disciplined, courageous, loyal and patriotic citizen. Physical education was emphasized over the prowess of the mind. Athens was the intellectual capital of the world in the fifth century B.C. The purpose of education for Athenian was to develop responsible free citizens of good character and high intellectual ability. All the citizens were given opportunity in the government and in the making of the laws.

Idealism

In all the ancient educational systems and the models of teaching, idealism had been emphasized for the well being of man and society. Idealism is the common thread of the education of the human race around the world in all these ancient periods. The teacher had insisted on character and conduct as much as the mastery of the subject in order to make good citizens. Idealism is the recognition of the society over self; sacrifice over satisfaction; and means over ends.

> As man searches to discover values, he finds an ethical core in the wisdom of the human race which has endured over time. Ethical conduct grows out of the permanent aspects of a social and cultural tradition which, in reality, is the wisdom of the past functioning in the present. The rich sources of value education are found in such cultural subjects as history, literature, religion, and philosophy. These are the subjects which reflect the unfolding of the absolute throughout man's historical experience. (Gutek, 1974, p.17.).

While propagating idealism, the method used by the teacher needs to draw the learner's own conclusion as to how he or she should assimilate the contents of his or her reading, or what the student gets from the environment, after a thorough scrutiny of the mind, whether the idea advances human development; whether the new learning will benefit society, and mankind. In this introspection, it is quite possible for the learner to encounter situations in which the required outcome may be in conflict with the dictates

of the inner conscience. It is the teacher who should guide the student in such a situation, as to the application of the general rule to particular situations, in the background of idealism. The teacher should guide the student for making exceptions, and initiate the process of rewriting the laws that govern the society. It is the Socratic method of dialogue. Initiate the dialogue, and leave it to society for discussion to analyze rules that can be improved and advanced for the welfare of the society. This is by no means an ordinary nor an easy task. The situations discussed here are the ones challenged by the tasks undertaken by Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and the like (Gutek, 1974, p.21).

Why do I want to teach?

Education is at the crossroads, subject to the scrutiny of parents, the government and the media. There is an outcry regarding the quality of education our students receive, and there is a question as to whether they are prepared to take on the global competition currently facing them. Are they prepared for life by our educators? These are challenges only a person of extraordinary courage, commitment and content can meet. A person needs to have moral strength, to withstand the onslaught, by dedication and hard work, in order to enter this profession. Master teachers of the past inspire us to be torch bearers. It is our commitment that matters. Is one ready to forgo the Friday night parties for the sake of making the society a better place to live? Someone needs to stop chasing dollars, to chase ignorance and darkness away. It is not important, in which school one teaches, and how prestigious the school, but how committed a teacher is to the profession and the task ahead, that will contribute to the cause of education. It is the sense of accomplishment that pays off. If there is one reason to teach I would say self actualization, however selfish it may seem, is the one that does good to

mankind. One does not have to be popular, but be involved. My mission is accomplished, if I can create an impact on the life of one person who could have otherwise been left out in the race for survival and superiority. However, it is not enough a person is committed, and knowledgeable. Getting the message across to the students is of paramount importance, and many great teachers, by their own ingenuity have done it in their own ways, whose models are exemplary in the accomplishment of this noble task.

While models are imperative, values and standards of quality are also imperative. William Glasser, author of *Schools Without Failure* has propagated the idea of quality and standards in his most recent book. Apparently teachers have been accepting marginal mediocre work and must allow only quality work. We must recognize quality, reward it, demand it and encourage it. The cultures of India and China have revered it. We must regain the respect for education and learning that we once had. But beware- Glasser says, "There is no way to achieve quality without hard work". (Glasser, 1990, p. 98). In the U.S. microwave, fast food society, many students are unwilling to invest the amount of work necessary for success. There are extraneous variables also operative, such as T.V. and sports. One wants to teach because teaching is a quality endeavor, which calls for quality instruction in a quality environment.

Conclusion

Concepts such as *Mastery Learning* and *Individually Prescribed Instruction* advance the idea that any student can learn a subject, irrespective of one's aptitude, and the only variable for a student learning quick, and the one that learns slow, is additional time and individual instruction (Carrol, 1971, pp.37-41). The students can not be blamed squarely for all the ills of education today. Much of the responsibility rests on the

teachers, who need to understand the purpose of education. Robert Hutchins says,

> "One purpose of education is to draw out the elements of our common human nature. These elements are the same in any time or place. The notion of educating a man (woman) to live in any particular environment, is therefore foreign to a true conception of education. Education implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Truth is everywhere the same. Hence, education should be everywhere the same. The heart of any course of study designed for the whole people will be the same at any time, any place, under any political, social, or economic conditions, because all societies have generic similarity". (p.66-67).

We now operate with a multitude of value systems, ideologies, theories and philosophies. Perhaps our entire educational system is changing and we are caught in a "culture shock" or "future shock" of some sort. Perhaps we need to have a new perspective on education. In any case, our culture is profoundly affecting our values toward education (Jackson and Shaughnessy, 1990). May be it is time to ponder, whether we need to reorient our ideology of teaching, to include in the curriculum, idealistic values of the past, from the lands of peoples, of which this country is made of. It could be a necessary change to meet the challenge of the global competition which demands an immediate attention.

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